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Evaluating writing in English as a second language

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss a few approaches to the evaluation of writing, their advantages and disadvantages in detail and accompanied them with practical examples based on teacher’s experience in running a Course of Academic Writing at the Faculty of Informatics and Management (FIM) of the University of Hradec Kralove (UHK), Czech Republic. Firstly, the evaluation methods will be described and their benefits and drawbacks contrasted. Secondly, evaluation scales for grading students’ assignments will be outlined. Finally, the paper will provide a practical example of evaluating writing in the Course of Academic Writing at FIM UHK.

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Keywords: criteria; English; evaluation; feedback; university students; writing.

1. Introduction

The teaching of English involves four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) which students should master to become proficient users of this target language. However, the skill of writing probably seems the most difficult and the least attractive to learn. Moreover, teachers also find it the most demanding to teach since it requires a lot of time and sensitive feedback, which is crucial to a writing development. The 2004 Harvard Study of Writing [2] concludes, feedback emerged as the hero and the anti-hero of our study—powerful enough to convince students that they could or couldn’t do the work in a given field, to push them toward or away from selecting their majors, and contributed, more than any other single factor, to students’ sense of academic belonging or alienation.

This paper therefore attempts to describe different methods of providing a proper evaluation of students’ formal written English. However, before exploring the concept of evaluation, one has to clarify the difference between evaluation and assessment, the concepts which are sometimes wrongly understood and misplaced. The aim of assessment is to improve student’s learning. Assessment is viewed as information to improve student’s achievement. Assessments are based on the levels of achievement and standards developed for those curricular goals appropriate for the grade. As Watson (17.3.2011) claims, one could look at assessment and evaluation as the journey (assessment) versus the snapshot (evaluation). Assessment requires the gathering of evidence of student’s performance over a period of time to measure learning and understanding. Evaluation, on the other hand, occurs when a mark is assigned after the completion of a task, test, quiz, lesson or learning activity. A mark on a spelling test will determine if the child can spell the given words and would be seen as an evaluation.

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2. Evaluation methods

The most common evaluation methods of writing include (see e.g. Currier 2005 or Bacha 2001) holistic and analytic evaluation. The holistic evaluation involves reading a paper quickly in order to gain a broad impression of a writer’s skill. In contrast, the analytic scoring involves an itemized analysis and is commonly used to identify weaknesses in a student’s writing. The holistic evaluation is often used for informing placement decisions and measuring student’s achievement. On the contrary, the analytical evaluation looks at one specific item, such as a usage of articles or the correct word order in student’s piece of writing.

Nevertheless, before the evaluation of any piece of student’s work, evaluation criteria or traits in form of a scale must be set. These criteria or the traits may be called rubrics. As MarkBook (17.3.2011) states, rubrics provide a means of judging student’s performance. A rubric is a rule or guide. A rubric enables an evaluator to convert (i.e. "grade") a given quality of student work into a letter grade, percentage, or level. Tests involving multiple choice, fill in the blanks, matching, or other "right/wrong" items don’t need rubrics. However, complex student work, such as an essay, cannot be properly and fairly graded using a simple "right/wrong" rubric. Instead, the evaluator should devise a rubric chart that enables conversion of the work’s quality into a percentage, letter grade, or level. This chart may contain more than one criterion for grading. For instance, the evaluator may be expected to grade an essay on grammar, punctuation, structure, works cited, logic, etc.

Thus, a holistic scoring rubric guides teachers by explaining what features to scrutinize as they read. These descriptions are useful because they give evaluators a sense of what aspects of a student’s writing should be critiqued. For example, a rubric may suggest evaluating a text according to the extent to which it develops a main idea, supports that idea, uses appropriate vocabulary and punctuation, and makes clear transitions. In this way the holistic rubrics assign one score that reflects the overall impression of the assignment based on the combined criteria. On the other hand, the analytic rubrics assign separate scores to each criterion. However, in the field of second language teaching (SLT) there is not only one view on scoring the written work. The holistic scoring often includes specific features of compositions (Cohen and Manion, 1994). Some researchers argue, however, that the holistic scoring focuses on what the writer does well rather than on the writer’s specific areas of weakness which is of more importance for decisions concerning promotion (Hamp-Lyons, 1990; Reid, 1993; Cohen and Manion, 1994; White, 1994; Elbow, 1999). And as Bacha (2001) points out, they do see its value for evaluating classroom essays and large scale ratings such as those done for the Test of Written English international exam, as it saves time and money and at the same is efficient. For student’s diagnostic purposes, the holistic scoring can, therefore, serve to initially identify the students’ writing proficiency level, but for more specific feedback needed in following up on students’ progress and to evaluate students’ proficiency levels for promotional purposes, criterion-referenced evaluation criteria (rather than norm-referenced) are needed which analytic scales provide.

3. Evaluation scales

There exist many different scales on evaluating writing (see Appendix 1 and compare to Haswell 2007: 13). However, the author recommends Bacha’s model (2001) which follows The Jacobs et al. (1981) ESL Composition Profile. In addition, other researchers, e.g. Hamp-Lyons (1990), considers their criteria for scoring writing to be best-known scoring procedure for ESL (English as a second language) writing at present time. The Profile is divided into five major writing components: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics with each one having four rating levels of very poor, poor to fair, average to good, and very good to excellent. Each component and level has clear descriptors of the writing proficiency for that particular level as well as a numerical scale. For example, very good to excellent content has a minimum rating of 27 and a maximum of 30 indicating essay writing which is “knowledgeable — substantive — thorough development of thesis — relevant to assigned topic”, while very poor content has a minimum of 13 and a maximum of 16 indicating essay writing that “does not show knowledge of subject — non-substantive-not pertinent — or not enough to evaluate” (Jacobs et al., 1981). The range for each of the writing skills are content 13–30, organization 7–20, vocabulary 7–20, language 5–25 and mechanics 2–5. Benchmark essays are included in Jacobs et al. (1981) text as guides for teachers. The author of this article follows the five main writing components of the Profile, however, she expresses the rating of student’s essays in percentages (see Part 4 for further details).
4. Evaluating writing in ESL in the Course of Academic Writing

The course focuses on the process of writing from beginning to end, and gives advice on how to write professionally. It shows the component parts of the writing process, that is: envisaging what to write, planning an outline, drafting passages, writing the whole thing, revising and rewriting it, and finishing it in an appropriate form, together with publishing all or parts of a text. In addition, it concentrates on those features which are different in English and Czech, such as citations, compiling a bibliography or using appropriate English. As for the last aspect, there are independent sections on grammar structures in written English, lexical structures, and punctuation.

As Frydrychova Klimova (2011) indicates, the course exposes students to blended learning. That means they meet a teacher once into two weeks to discuss and clarify the mistakes they made in their assignments (i.e. essays), which together with a deeper self-study of the materials implemented in their on-line eLearning course, they write every second week. Therefore, the course undoubtedly contributes to the development and support of more interactive strategies. Students also have an easy access to ample materials, which they can exploit on their own from the cosiness of their homes. They can get immediate feedback on the on-line exercises. If they have a problem, they can contact a tutor and they do not have to wait until next lesson. In the course of the semester students usually have 5 assignments. They are as follows:

- A summary of a lecture/ seminar
- An argumentative essay without bibliographies and references
- Two essays including bibliographies and references
- Writing an entry for Wikipedia (see also Tardy 2010)

Particularly the last assignment is a challenging activity for students because when students are creating an authentic article for Wikipedia from scratch, they are not only motivated to write but begin to recognize the usefulness and necessity of the formal writing aspects of their course, e.g. the importance of attending to errors and checking facts when writing to be published.

All student’s assignments/ essays are submitted via the on-line course on the set date given to them by a teacher. As a rule, their essays are evaluated within 3 days. They are usually evaluated according to Bacha’s model (2001) – Jacobs (1981). However, the virtual learning environment WebCT, in which the course is run, offers scoring in percentage. Therefore, students receive their evaluation in percentage. Fig.1 below shows an evaluation scale used in the course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Components</th>
<th>Criteria/ Traits</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>extent, relevance, subject knowledge</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>coherence, fluency, clarity, logical sequencing</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>richness, appropriate register, word form mastery</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language use</td>
<td>accuracy (a usage of articles, word order, tenses, prepositions, sentence constructions)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
<td>paragraphing, spelling, capitalization, punctuation</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Evaluation Scale used in the Course of Academic Writing

The description of the above-mentioned traits slightly differs from those given by Bacha (2001) – Jacobs et al. (1981) since some of them, particularly the language use, conforms to the needs of a Czech ESL learner. The most frequent errors for Czech learners are the use of articles, word order, tenses and prepositions.

In fact, students are exposed to double feedback on their essays. Firstly, via the virtual learning environment WebCT, through which students receive a general written commentary on their improvement in the course and also a diagnostic analysis of their assignment that can be uploaded into the on-line system. Then, at the beginning of the following contact lesson, students once more discuss their errors in class.

5. Conclusion
As the above-mentioned theory claims, the holistic scoring is not as informative for learning situation as analytic one. Nevertheless, the author’s experience suggests that both types of scoring should be used, particularly when longer assignments/ essays are written in order to provide students with feedback on their overall progress and draw their attention to the most striking errors they should avoid. Furthermore, an exploitation of the blended learning methodology can have a positive impact on the enhancement of student’s writings because they receive double evaluation on their written work.

In conclusion, a general method for evaluating writing assignments (Evaluating writing assignments 1999) is outlined in order to demonstrate all the efforts of a dedicated ESL teacher to grading the second language writing:

- Read the paper quickly, making no marks but getting a sense of the organization and general nature of the paper. Try to decide what you like about the paper and what works.
- Reread the paper slowly, marking errors and writing marginal comments. Read paragraph by paragraph, thinking less about organization.
- Reread the paper quickly, thinking about the overall purpose of the paper.
- Good and bad features, number of formal errors, and your marginal comments. After this reading, write your final (end) comments and assign a grade.
- Make a note of the paper in the student’s file. Compare its successes and failures with previous writing of the student. Note improvements.

References


Appendix 1

**Main Traits of Scoring Rubrics for Six Tests of ESL Writing** (Haswell 2007: 6)

| Test in English for Educational Purposes (Associated Examining Board) | Content | Organization | Cohesion | Vocabulary | Punctuation | Spelling |
| Certificate in Communicative Skills in English (Royal Society of Arts/University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate) | Accuracy [of mechanics] |
Appropriacy
Range [of expression]
Complexity [organization and cohesion]

Test of Written English (Educational Testing Service)
Length
Organization
Style
Grammar
Sentences

Michigan English Language Battery
Topic development
Sentences
Organization/coherence
Mechanics

Canadian Test of English for Scholars and Trainees
Content
Organization
Language use

International English Language Testing System
Register
Rhetorical organization
Style
Content